

Demons and Benevolent Spirits in the Ancient Near East

A Phenomenological Overview

MANFRED HUTTER, BONN

1. Introductory remarks

When we talk about “demons” in Ancient Near Eastern cultures we can start with the Greek loanword to European languages. The Greek word *daimōn* can originally refer to any supernatural beings, and was sometimes also used as a parallel word to *theói* (“gods”).¹ It is further important to remember that the word in its early usage did not refer to negative semantics. As divine beings in ancient cultures often can be considered as ambiguous, *daimones* could be considered as either “evil” or “good” in the early use of the word.

This ambivalence of “demons” can also be seen in Mesopotamia, Northern Syria and Anatolia, but one has to acknowledge that in the majority of cases, “demons” get a negative image. In terms of terminology – contrary to Greek evidence – there is no general term for “demons” in the relevant languages but a variety of words, for which the modern scholar in an additive way can employ the translation “demon(s)”. As there is no general term for “demon”, cuneiform texts can use the sign DINGIR (“god”) also for demons, meaning that within the cosmological and theological context “demons” are ontologically closer to gods than to men. Therefore they act from the divine sphere and interfere with humans, but can also act as divine messengers which sometimes gives them a function comparable to angels, but normally in translations the English term “angel” is used only seldom for such beings; the reason for this may be that the physical appearance of these beings more often than not evokes images comparable to the European depiction of demons in the Middle ages; so one cannot rule out that

1 Cf. Riley, Demon 235-236; Hutter, Dämonen / Geister 533; Heeßel, Pazuzu 4.

talking and writing about “demons” in the Ancient Near East in academic discourse since the late 19th century has also been influenced by western conception of Christian Medieval demons.²

Turning to ancient Iran, we face a different situation. The Iranian religious system as it is available to us according to sources from the first millennium BCE, is based on a dualism of a spiritual realm which is explicitly either good or evil;³ this dualistic setting at least in its general structure can be tracked back to Zoroaster who lived in Eastern Iran at the end of the second millennium or at the turn of the millennium. The two dualistic principles are mentioned in the early Zoroastrian tradition as two spirits (in Avestan: *mainyu*), the “holy” one and the evil one, and some texts even consider them as twins. The historical development of Zoroastrianism already during the first half of the first millennium BCE started to elaborate on these spirits: the holy spirit not only was identified with Ahura Mazda, the supreme God in the early Zoroastrian pantheon, but also other “immortal and holy” spirits (*ameša spentas*) and divine beings (*yazatas*) surrounded Ahura Mazda; sometimes western scholars call these beings even “angels”. The evil spirit became even more personalized as Angra Mainyu, who not only functions as the anti-god and the adversary of Ahura Mazda but who also became surrounded by a huge host of demons (*daēwas*); systematic theological writings of the Zoroastrians partly even construct an exact ranking of “angels” and “demons” in a precise opposite way.

Bearing this in mind, theorizing about “demons” in the Ancient Near East should avoid an exclusively negative notion. From Mesopotamia to Anatolia we can see that there are intermediary beings between the human and divine world, who can easier than “gods” transcend the boundaries between these two worlds. They can interfere in our world both in a negative or positive way; in order to avoid or counteract their negative interference, rituals and incantations have been used, which therefore provide important source materials about such beings. In Iran the situation is different, because we can say that talking of “demons” with exclusively negative semantics is appropriate for Zoroastrianism and Iran.

2 Cf. Heeßel, Pazuzu 4-6; Ahn, Demon 504.

3 Cf. Hutter, Gott 19-20; Stausberg, Religion 90-99.

2. Demons as “lesser gods” or “anti-gods”

2.1 Cuneiform cultures

The Mesopotamian “pantheon” with its main gods is hierarchically structured, and divine beings of a lesser rank are “demons” or protective spirits.⁴ Their function and might are more limited than that of the gods, and especially, their functions are more specified and related to an evil or undesirable situation in my opinion. Therefore many ways to counteract their functions or to protect oneself from such mischief are known in various texts; if we want to characterize Mesopotamian demons in a general way, one magical conjuration against them shows us that they are considered as different from other divine or human beings:⁵

“They are seven, they are seven,
 They are seven in the springs of the depths,
 They are seven, adorned in heaven.
 They grew up in the springs of the depths, in the cella.
 They are not male, they are not female,
 They are drifting phantoms,
 They take no wife, they beget no son.
 They know neither sparing of life nor mercy,
 They heed no prayers nor entreaties.
 They are steeds that grew up in the mountains,
 They are the evil ones of Ea,
 They are the prefects of the gods.
 They loiter in the side streets to make trouble on the highway.
 They are evil, they are evil!
 They are seven, they are seven, they are twice seven!
 Be conjured by heaven, be conjured by the netherworld.”

One general aspect of demons deduced from this text is their anomaly, and another feature of demons that gets clear from this quotation is their anonymity. Other texts also mention many names or epithets of demons and their character. The Akkadian incantation text Maqlû (V 64-71) e.g. gives a list of demons, all characterized as “evil”: *utukku, alû, gallû, râbišu, labâšu, lamaštu, lilû, lilîtu* and *ardat lilî*.

Other texts tell about conflicts between gods and “demons”, who then function as anti-gods. In the Enūma Eliš, Tiamat prepares herself to battle against Marduk by arranging her army – made up of demons:⁶

⁴ Cf. Groneberg, Aspekte 147-150; Hutter, Dämonen 533-534.

⁵ Foster, Days 407.

⁶ Foster, Epic 395; cf. Foster, Days 23.

"She [Tiamat] deployed serpents, dragons, and hairy hero-men, lion monsters, lion men, scorpion men, mighty demons, fish men, bull men, bearing unsparing arms, fearing no battle. Her commands were absolute, no one opposed them. Eleven indeed on this wise she created. From among the gods her offspring, who composed her assembly, she raised up Qingu from among them, it was he she made greatest!".

The following battle among gods clearly shows that these "demons" are some lesser gods who oppose the higher ones, but still are gods. It is interesting to refer also to the myth "Išum and Erra", when it is mentioned that the divine nature of the Sebetti is different (from other gods)⁷ – but also their divineness is not challenged in any way. Another relatively detailed description of demons can be found in the Sumerian myth of Inanna's descent to the netherworld; after the goddess can leave the netherworld for a while, she is accompanied by hordes of demons:⁸

"Small demons like a corral, big demons like guardhouse, clung to her side. Those who accompanied her, those who accompanied Inanna know no food, know no drink, eat no grain offering, drink no libation, accept no nice gifts, never enjoy the pleasure of sexual intercourse, never have sweet children to kiss, but tear the wife away from her husband during intercourse, carry off children from their father's knees, and remove the bride from her marriage chamber."

This description shows one further aspect of demons: they only seldom have an individuality, but they appear as hosts of demons or as a group, who has a leader, but generally they appear as an anonymous group. But this also leads to the notion that one cannot address them exactly because of their anonymity and they can only be identified as individuals in incantation texts with some difficulty. But without being called by name they cannot be handled well by the exorcist.

Similar ideas about demons are also known from sources coming from Ancient Syria, when we neither can put a sharp borderline between gods who can bring harms to humans or demons and evil ghosts.⁹ Also in Syria we encounter conflicts among gods in mythological traditions, when the rivals of the successful or victorious gods are depicted as evil demons. One impressive example are two texts from Ugarit: KTU 1.102 gives a list of divine beings, on its obverse some well-known gods are mentioned, on the reverse minor "gods" or "demons"; comparing the names on the reverse of KTU 1.102 with KTU 1.106, we can come to some further conclusions. KTU 1.106 refers to

7 Dalley, Erra 405; cf. Foster, Days 134.

8 Sladek, Descent 175-176.

9 Cf. Wyatt, Religion 549; del Olmo Lete, Religion 44-45, – both with further references.

offerings for Rašpu and the funerary cult, which leads to the result that at least partly “Ugaritic demonology” is related to the realm of dead and the netherworld.¹⁰ This connection with the realm of death also puts demons in relation to sickness, but also to harmful ghosts of deceased ancestors.

Some individual demons from Ugarit texts can be mentioned here again: in the mythological traditions mentioned in relation to the Ugaritic god Ba'lu, some anti-gods are engaged in battle with him, namely Lotanu or Tunnanu; they both are helpers of Yammu, the god of the sea and Ba'lu's adversary, but their function and description also allows us to treat them as “demons”. As people of Ugarit were afraid of evil spirits and demons who could threaten their health or their general well-being, Ba'lu and ‘Anatu sometimes were invoked as helpers against such “demonic” beings; in the incantation text KTU 1.82 Ba'lu is asked to destroy several demons like Tunnanu, Rašpu and his arrows of pestilence, some of Horonu's negative creatures, the night-demons, and the “sons of the disease”; it is quite possible that this text in a concrete ways focuses on the bite of a snake and to cure the patient from the poisonous bite; but the imaginary used in the texts relates this misfortune to demons.¹¹

Also texts in Hittite language from Anatolia, mainly from the 15th to the 13th century BCE, tell us about demonic beings who bring harm to people and who are minor gods; but also among the Hittites some of these divine beings are ambivalent. Terminologically, Hittite texts also use the logogram DINGIR (“god”) for demons, but some composite names of such beings are built with the word –sepa “genius, demon”. Some terrifying minor gods can be seen as demons,¹² e.g. the Innarawantes, who are wearing bloodied clothes, or the Hantisepa-gods, whose eyes are red with blood and whose clothes are bloodied. Also the reference to a statue of Sulinkatte who holds a sword in his right hand and the head of a man in his left hand, gives the impression that this warrior-like god shows demonic features. Such references show that also in the Hittite texts “demons” are divine beings or some gods in special occasion serve some “negative” and demonic function.

When we try to generalize Ancient Near Eastern thoughts about demons we should also mention their physiognomy. While gods in many cases are described in a human form, sometimes also with wings and to be differentiated from humans by their attributes, “Demons” are

10 Cf. del Olmo Lete, Religion 58-61, 231-232.

11 Cf. del Olmo Lete, Religion 373-379; de Moor, Anthology 175-181. Further texts dealing with demons are e.g. KTU 1.96, KTU 1.100 or KTU 1.169.

12 Haas, Geschichte 371, 503; Hutter, Aspects 252.

described having a mixed body – they can have an animal's head with a human body, sometimes their body is composed of parts of humans, four-legged animals and birds, or to a human body a tail or horns or claws are added. This corporeal form refers to their strength, which is much bigger than that of a human being, but also refers to their danger. Some typical “demonic” features can be expressed by the lion's or bull's strength or by the serpent's or dragon's venom. The description of the demons, who accompany Tiamat in a battle against the generation of younger gods, mentions what demons look like. Another example of the terrifying form can be found in a text from Ugarit (KTU 1.12,20-41).¹³

“Go out into the plain of the demons, into the desert of the murderous god.
Dig, o handmaid, throw up the dust furiously, position the two bricks.
Writhe and bear the Devourers, crouch and bear the Rippers.

Ilu proclaimed their names. On them were horns like bulls, and humps like oxen, and on them was the face of Ba'lū. ... Surely Ba'lū coveted them, the son of Daganu fancied them. Ba'lū stalked them on foot, yes, the god Haddu on tip-toe.”

Though such ideas of the form of demons can be frightening, they again express their ambivalent character. The awful form has also apotropaic functions: the negative form of “demons” is also an appropriate means to ward off all kinds of evil. Therefore such “demons” can also function as guardian spirits, so that statues of such divine beings are displayed at the entrance of temples because they also are protective beings, ranging as minor deities, who can interfere in a benevolent – or malevolent – way in the cosmos and the world of the humans.

2.2 The dualistic concept in Iran

Originally, the early Iranian concepts of demons might have been similar to the other Ancient Near Eastern areas, in a way that with the polytheistic old Iranian pantheon gods had both good and evil sides, depending on their relationship to each other, but also depending on man's behaviour towards his gods. A change in this concept occurred in the teachings of Zoroaster and his followers, who rearranged this world-view and consequently also the position of gods along dualistic lines, with clear distinction between good divine and evil demonic beings. The Zoroastrian scriptures reflect this reorganization of the pantheon and later Iranian texts get more and more detailed.

13 De Moor, Anthology 130-131.

So we find already a systematic hierarchy of demons headed by Angra Mainyu in the younger Avestan texts during the first half of the first millennium BCE. The “evil spirit” who is the main opponent and adversary of the “holy spirit” (Spenta Mainyu) had become identified with Ahura Mazda as the supreme god of Zoroastrianism by the middle of the first millennium BCE at the latest.¹⁴ Both antagonistic principles are in battle since the beginning of the world (Yt 13,76-78):¹⁵

“For they [the Frawašis] are the bravest of the creation of both Spirits, the good, strong, beneficent Frawašis of the Righteous, who rose up (to help) then when the two Spirits, both the Beneficent Spirit and the Evil, created (their) creations. When the Evil Spirit stormed the creation of Good Truth, Good Mind and Fire rushed in between. These two overcome the hostilities of him, the lying Evil Spirit.”

As an opposite to Ahura Mazda’s creation, Angra Mainyu sets his “anti-creation” in action; the most famous expression of this counter-creation is any kind of harm and all kinds of sickness, as we can read in a passage in the Vendidad (22,2.9). Angra Mainyu thus becomes the archdemon or the “demon of demons” who leads all the others; a high ranking list of the main Zoroastrian demons mentions the following ones: Indra, Saurwa, Nanhaitya, Taurwi and Zairik;¹⁶ a whole list of such central demons in Zoroastrianism counts seven demons, a number which corresponds to the seven “Amesha Spentas” – the “Holy Immortal Ones” as good divine beings surrounding Ahura Mazda.

As one of the general characteristics of these Avestan demons¹⁷ one can mention that they are closely associated with lie, who is personalized as the she-demon “Lie” (Druj). Druj also becomes associated with other demons since the first half of the first millennium BCE, e.g. with Nasu, the she-demon of death, or with the dragon-like demon Azi Dahaka; another important demon within Zoroastrianism is the Aeshma, the demon of wrath, whose name and function is still reflected as Asmodaios in the Book of Tobit of the Greek Old Testament.¹⁸ It is along these dualistic lines that Zoroastrianism arranges its religious system and everybody is engaged to counteract all these demons throughout one’s life in order to help to overcome their might already in this world; but the final defeat of the demons will happen only at the end of time by the future saviour (Yt 19,95-96):¹⁹

¹⁴ Stausberg, Religion 132.

¹⁵ Malandra, Introduction 113.

¹⁶ Cf. Malandra, Introduction 21.

¹⁷ Stausberg, Religion 123, 135-136; cf. further Christensen, Essai.

¹⁸ Hutter, Asmodeus.

¹⁹ Malandra, Introduction 96-97.

"The companions of the victorius Astwat.areta will come forth having good minds, good speech, good deeds (and) good daēnas, who also do not speak falsehoods with their own tongues. Wrath with the bloody cudgel, whose Xwarenah is evil, will flee before them. Through Truth, Astwat.areta will be victorious over the evil Lie (Druj) who is hideous, who is composed of darkness. He will also be victorious over the Evil Spirit. The Good Spirit will be victorious over it. He will be victorious over the falsely spoken word. The rightly spoken word will be victorious over it. He will conquer health and immortality, both hunger and thirst. Health and Immortality will conquer evil hunger and thirst. Angra Mainyu, the doer of evil deeds, impotent, will flee."

3. Demons, individual mischief and society

Asking for the origin of the negative aspects of "demons" as we see them in the cuneiform cultures, one way of explanation can be given from the human experience of man's limitedness. People who experience natural catastrophes like thunderstorms, sudden death or disease which cannot be explained, are threatened with fear. From this point of view, demons are personifications of such situations of mischief which cannot be foreseen. The reason why such "demons" overpower a person, lies within the sphere of magic or within the general evil character which then marks a central feature of demons. Such experiences lead to systems and typologies of demonic beings. Therefore several demons are closely associated with this natural phenomenon; the most popular demons that can be mentioned in this context are the Sumerian LIL-demons. Others may be characterized as bringing all kinds of illness, which enter the human body like winds and storms. From one text we get information how several demons take hold of a person, leading to his weakening and illness. In the Middle Babylonian version of the myth "Nergal and Erekigal" Nergal is accompanied on his way to the netherworld by fourteen demons:²⁰

"I shall give you seven and seven demons to go with you: [..., ..., ...], Flashes-of-Lightning, Bailiff, Croucher, Expulsion, Wind, Fits, Staggers, Stroke, Lord-of-the-Roof, Feverhot, Scab."

Some names of these demons can be identified as some kinds of illness, like Bennu (fits), Libbu (scab) or Ummu (heat, fever). But also Anatolian magical (therapeutic) texts mention demons who can be identified as markers of illness. More systematically we find – according to the dualistic setting – the connection of demons with illness in Zoroastrian-

20 Dalley, Nergal 390.

ism, as already mentioned above. Angra Mainyu is the creator of all kinds of demons, who weaken man's health and bring all diseases to him, as well as of the she-demon of death who is part of this group.

Another possibility to arrange demons as a group refers to sexual behaviour or the field of sexuality and fertility in general. Here we also encounter a further aspect, namely the concept of impurity. In ancient Near Eastern cultures sexual contacts result in cultic impurity and some ritualistic purification becomes necessary. If such a purification does not take place, demons can get hold of such a person to weaken him; but also forms of miscarriage or missing fertility or impotence can be attributed to the influence of demons. In the Mesopotamian and Syrian area, both Lilitu and Lamaštu²¹ are female demons who are associated with childbirth and death in childbed, further as beings whose sexual behaviour deviates from "normal" sexuality. Texts refer to Lilitu mentioning that her sexuality is of some "other" kind, as she does not sleep with a man as a man sleeps with his wife. In this way, Lilitu can be compared with Ištar who stands at the window looking for a man in order to seduce him, love him and kill him.²² Another fact that shows that Lilitu's sexuality is not a regular kind of sexuality, is illustrated by references which show that she cannot bear children and that she has no milk but only poison to feed a baby as a deceitful wet-nurse. This mixing up of ideas originally referring either to Lilitu or to Lamaštu began already during the Middle Babylonian period and this demonized being also spread to Syria in course of time – as a female demon, endangering both men with her seduction and women by stealing their babies or bringing miscarriage to them. The same applies to Zoroastrian traditions; though sexuality is not seen as a demonic force, the she-demon of sexual desire who is also considered as the primeval whore²³ seduces the righteous one in order to lead him astray so that he might join the realm of Angra Mainyu and oppose Ahura Mazda's good creation.

Demons are part of the cosmos, so they are not limited to some special place or to a given time. But we can see that sometimes both time and space are related to them in a special way. As they are considered anonymous and cannot be seen or identified exactly, they are excellent sources of "fear", which arises especially at night-time. In the darkness of the night their invisibility is even greater than during day-time; also those demons who are connected with sexuality, can be associated with the night. Then again, also midday and the heat of the high risen sun is

21 Groneberg, Aspekte 147-148; cf. also Heeßel, Pazuzu 74-75.

22 Groneberg, Aspekte 159-162.

23 Cf. de Jong, Jeh.

taken as the moment when demons can best attack man. Fever brought by demons and the hot weather thus get compared. – Referring to space, they prefer to stay in the wilderness or at places outside the cultural area, which in “normal life” one wants to avoid to stay there. They linger around at graveyards, close to caves or in the desert, but also in mountainous areas. So several texts mention the right behaviour and provide magical shelter in cases when one has to travel through such areas to avoid being attacked by demons. But not only such places, but also people who live outside the “cultural areas” and civilizations of the Ancient Near East, can therefore be associated with demons – leading to the demonizing of strangers and foreign lands or societies; thus we read in the Maqlû incantation that witches and sorceresses par excellence are women from Elam or Hanigalbat, or Quataean or Sutaeian women. Such mountainous areas with their inhabitants conquered or sacked Babylon several times in the course of history. This experience lead to the demonizing of the home-land of these people. Also several Hittite ritual texts which counteract bewitchment mention gossip, several kinds of illness, demonic beings and mountain dwellers or nomadic strangers side by side, who have overcome the patient by their magical and demonic means; therefore the patient has to be cured by magical and medical treatment. – As demons dwell outside the cultivated country,²⁴ some texts consider the language of demons of some other kind, but also the best way to counteract demons can be seen in addressing them in their own – and “not understandable” – language; several incantation texts therefore mix up different languages to address a demon – partly even highly mutilated forms of Sumerian, Elamian or Hurrian; by using these languages the exorcist provides his client with the psychological feeling and safety that the incantation will successfully address the demons and counteract the demonic bewitchment or lead it back to the sorcerer, because the therapeutic exorcist knows the “language of demons” which his client does not understand. But therefore this language has been considered to be very powerful to overcome demons.

In conclusion we have to say that demons also are closely related to society: people(s) who bring harm to others can be considered as demons and sorcerers or witches. Therefore incantation texts sometimes do not clearly distinguish between witches or demons (Maqlû IV 129). Some texts mention demons who will seize a person like a sorcerer

24 Cf. on the “social demonising” of witches and foreigners also Abusch, Image 39-44; Haas, Dämonisierung and further Haas, Geschichte 882-884.

seizes such a person. So we can conclude that social conflicts also shape the Ancient Near Eastern ideas about demons.

4. General Conclusion

This phenomenological approach to demons in Ancient Near Eastern cultures and ancient Iranian culture according to Zoroastrian sources might also be of interest for further detailed comparisons between demons in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures and demons in the Biblical world. Demons like Lilith or Asmodaios, who are also mentioned in the Old Testament, clearly show cultural connections between the religious systems and ideas in Ancient Israel and the surrounding cultures. Several references in the Old Testament to demons who dwell in desert areas or whose appearance shows that they may look like animals or composite beings, express ideas which can be well compared to phenomena attributed to demons outside Ancient Israel, too. Also the “demonizing” of sorcerers and witches can be seen in a broader context. From the material covered above, I would like to focus on two results we should keep in mind when talking about demons and spirits in the Ancient Near East.

Demons are part of the superhuman cosmic sphere and they can be seen as minor deities whose interactions with humans are considered as negative and harmful. On a systematic and typological level, demons from Ancient Near East are only tentatively seen as negative beings because they can also interact in neutral ways with humans; this is the case when they act as divine messengers or as guardian spirits. From a phenomenological point of view, in this aspect they also share some functions with angels. Because of the dualistic system taught by Zoroaster in Eastern Iran first, Iranian demons are exclusively “demonic” beings or anti-gods who clearly oppose the gods of Ahura Mazda’s good creation. So we can conclude that the status of demons, if they are “absolutely” or only “relatively” demonic beings, depends on the broader religious contexts in the society covered in this article.

In those cases where demons are actively involved with humans, humans have developed many means to protect themselves or to counteract such demons. In cuneiform literature, lots of incantation texts deal with the removal of demons or bewitchment which is thought to be brought to a person by a sorcerer or witch who is supported by demons. Specialists who use these incantation texts on behalf of a person who was threatened by demons, cover a wide range of “professions”: therapeutics, specialists in medical treatment, doctors, or “psycholo-

gists”; cultic specialists for purification of the patient must be mentioned, too, because the state of impurity weakens a person so that demons can get hold of this person. The idea of impurity is also highly developed in Zoroastrianism as an excellent field where demons can seize a person; thus one Avestan text of the Zoroastrian religion (*Videvdad*) deals in very detailed order with the “law against demons”, providing exact ritualistic and legalistic regulations of behaviour to avoid that demons can win might over a person. But because of the ethical aspects of Zoroaster’s teaching, Zoroastrianism also puts heavy weight on the correct ethical behaviour of a person as an excellent way to counteract the influence of demons in the world, because due to his own ethical behaviour, every person can help to battle symbolically against the demons and thus also strengthen divine beings of the good creation. Thus we can conclude that man’s reaction against demons first of all lies within a ritualistic context, that helps him both by medical, psychological and religious-ritualistic acts to overcome his fear of demons, which might also lead to his exclusion from society, if it cannot be removed by such means. In Iranian tradition, the ethical aspect of fighting against demons must not be overlooked either. So already early Zoroastrianism focuses on an aspect related to counteracting demons that is missing in the contemporary cultures in other parts of the Ancient Near East.

Abstract

The contribution focuses on the Ancient Near East mainly during the second and the first half of the first millennium BCE; geographically both the areas of Mesopotamia, Northern Syria and Anatolia as well as Iran will be covered. According to the systematically established dualism in ancient Iran, this area cannot be compared to the other areas directly. In consideration of the possibility of Iranian thoughts influencing the Old Testament, Iran should not be excluded in this contribution. Defining demons as “lesser gods” or even “anti-gods” will make the starting point, then the responsibility of demons for individual mischief as well as for the connection of demons and society with aspects of “demonizing” the outsider of the given society will be described.

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